

John O'Shea Worked His Way to the Top At Brown University

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For many people, especially in the foodservice industry, staying at a job for over three decades is rare. But John O'Shea, executive chef at Brown University, has done just that. O'Shea started at Brown in 1976 and was promoted to Executive Chef eleven years ago.

"I came up through the ranks," the self-taught chef said. "I bought a lot of books and educational tapes."

O'Shea has had a few part-time stints in restaurants and country clubs to get a feel for other sides of the industry, but has never wanted to leave Brown for full time position at a commercial property. He enjoys his Monday through Friday schedule and being able to leave the operation in the hands of his staff on the weekends.

"I think I'm very fortunate," he said. "Most chefs that are out there [at hotels or country clubs] work weekends and longer hours."

Between dining halls, catering and retail outlets, Brown feeds about 10,000 people per day, which makes them one of the largest foodservice facilities in the state of Rhode Island. Trying to keep that many outlets organized can be a time consuming task, and O'Shea's job is mostly administrative, but he has a lot of technology to help him – including a computerized system that tells him exactly what he needs to order for the following week's menus.

"We're always ahead of the game so there are no curveballs," he said. "There are so many line items, there's no way you'd be able to remember [without the technology]. When I first came here we didn't have that. We used to use index cards."

In order to keep the students on campus satisfied, O'Shea works with a dietician and a nutritionist to create menus in five-week cycles. To accommodate the ever-changing menu, O'Shea's staff makes most meals from scratch, and they even have their own butcher shop. For the most part, the students appreciate the choices they are given.

"We have a one-year mandatory meal plan," O'Shea said. "But we have a very high retention rate and we're competing with a lot of [off campus] restaurants."

Competing with the off-campus outlets isn't O'Shea's only challenge in the kitchen. With the current state of the economy, he has to be more creative with the items he offers and work with vendors to get the best prices. Brown can only increase its meal plan costs by so much each year without turning off prospective and returning students.

"[The meal plan] is structured for the year," he said. "So if the price increases we have to manipulate the menu and make it work."

One way O'Shea can keep costs down in his kitchen is by implementing more environmentally friendly practices. They already recycle their grease for biodiesel and support an on campus farmers market and are looking at removing trays from dining halls this year to cut down on energy costs.

"If we don't do things, the students are very vocal," he said. "If it makes sense to use we'll certainly do something, or at least look into it."

Aside from focusing on some new green initiatives, O'Shea's major goal for his kitchen is training. As someone who worked his way up the ranks, he wants to see the same from his team. Many of his top level staff members have been at Brown for decades.

"I like seeing people succeed and strive to get to the next level," he said. "Sometimes they don't see that they have [the potential]. You have to give them a little push and help them get to the next level."

O'Shea is of the opinion that everyone in his kitchen should have an understanding of what the top level is doing so that they have goals to work towards.

"It will benefit you in the future," he said he tells his staff. "You don't want something just handed to you. You want to be able to earn it."

This is why he hires many people without culinary experience, especially from culinary schools. He thinks that too many students come out expecting to be handed an executive chef job right off the bat.

"You need to pay your dues," he said. "You can be the whiz kid, but have no practical experience. I like when people cook [in a restaurant] for three to five years, then go to culinary school. Then you know they have the passion."

